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Easter 5, Year A
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Where the Climbing Stops

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Whenever I hear that verse, I think back to 2003, when I served as a Deputy to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. And no, I didn't get a badge.

During that week, a resolution came before my committee asking the Convention to affirm that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. The resolution died in committee. It never made it to the floor for debate or a vote.

That may surprise some of you or even trouble some of you. But the resolution didn't die because we thought we were more enlightened than Jesus. The resolution died because we were refusing to turn an invitation into a weapon. We were refusing to use the words of Jesus against the very people who were struggling to receive them.

These words are not a litmus test for faithfulness but an invitation to find rest in the risen Christ.

Jesus speaks the words as words of comfort to his frightened friends, who are about to lose the one they love the most. Thomas, not wanting to let Jesus go, asks what everyone else is thinking. How can we know the way to where you are going?

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus says.

Jesus isn't offering turn by turn directions. Jesus is offering himself.

The dwelling place that Jesus goes ahead to prepare isn't a great big house in the sky. The dwelling place is the body of Christ - a body that has been broken, a body that is raised in us around this altar every Sunday.

Jesus is not asking us to climb the stairway to heaven. Jesus is asking us to rest and rise in him.

Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest and theologian, argued that Christianity isn't a new religion. Capon says the cross is evidence that God has gone out of the religion business altogether. The cross doesn't give us a better technique for climbing toward God. The cross ends the climbing and invites us to rest in the one who rises from the grave.

But resting in Christ is harder than resting sounds. Trying harder to prove ourselves is our default, trying harder to win approval is a strong survival instinct. The problem, however, is that trying harder to prove ourselves usually makes things worse.

Think of those Chinese finger traps. The harder you pull the further away from freedom you get. Or think of the kid in high school who tried too hard to fit in. The harder he tried, the further away the popular table got.

Our lesson from Acts gives us two men who show us the difference between climbing the stairway to heaven and resting in God.

The first man is Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church and the first Christian martyr. Stephen is being killed because of his most recent sermon. Not because the sermon was bad but because Stephen told the truth. And the truth threatened the religious authorities of the day.

As Stephen is being killed, Stephen is given a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And Stephen's final words echo Jesus' own, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

The death of Stephen echoes the death of Christ. Stephen's life is so formed by Christ that Christ is living through him.

Standing there, watching it all unfold, is a young man named Saul, who we will later know as St. Paul. Today, though, Saul is no apostle. Saul is a zealous Pharisee, a keeper of the law, a man convinced he is serving God.

While Saul doesn't throw the stones himself, Saul gives his approval. Saul is not a bystander. Saul is a persecutor convinced he is doing the Lord's work.

Here we have two men. Both are devout. Both know the scriptures. Both believe what they are doing is right. Stephen forgives his persecutors. Saul watches on and approves the persecution.

What is the difference? Here's one way to think about it.

Saul still thinks he must climb the stairway to heaven. Stephen is resting in the goodness and mercy of the One who is risen from the dead.

Saul lives under the law of religion. Stephen lives under the cross.

Stephen didn't become Stephen by trying harder to prove he was a good Christian. Stephen became Stephen by showing up to be fed by Christ, by resting and rising in Christ's mercy. Stephen let himself be shaped by the One who fulfilled the law by loving God and loving neighbor to the point of death - even death on a cross.

To rest in Christ is to rest and rise in the name given in baptism - beloved children of God. We don't have to prove ourselves anymore. We are already named. Already loved. We are already enough.

This doesn't mean what we do doesn't matter. Rest in Christ isn't a vacation from life. Rest in Christ means what we do isn't about earning acceptance. What we do isn't about climbing the stairway to heaven. Rather, our lives, what we do, what we say, are now about honoring the gift of resurrection life.

We are free to live and love like Stephen because nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Whether we live or die we are alive in the Lord.

So, we have a couple of choices.

We can keep climbing. We can use scripture to defend God, to police the boundaries of the faith, to measure ourselves against everyone else. That is the life of Saul. Though, thanks be to God, even Saul gets a second chance on the road to Damascus.

Or we can rest in the person of Christ. We can let the scriptures draw us to Christ so that we might rise in Christ's mercy here at this Table each and every week. Here, we take up residence in Christ, and Christ in us. That is the life of Stephen.

And it would be easy to hear that and think, I'm Stephen.

But Saul thought he was the hero of his story too.

So before any of us decide whose life ours most resembles, there is a harder question we need to ask. Where am I still climbing? What am I still trying to prove? And to whom?

As you approach the altar for communion today, remember that the altar is the place where the climbing stops. You are leaving behind the world of striving and climbing and entering a world where you are free to live and love, to rest and rise in the mercy of Christ.

At this altar and under this cross, a part of us dies so that the life of Christ might rise in us. And in the place of all our climbing and striving, Christ increases and our lives begin to reflect Christ's goodness, Christ's mercy, Christ's compassion, Christ's love.

So hear those words from John's gospel one more time. Not as a weapon. Not as a measuring stick for faithfulness. Rather, hear those words as an invitation into a relationship with the One who invites us to stop climbing so we can rest and rise in him.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Amen.

